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ABSTRACT

Dictations are not sufficient as exercises for developing listening comprehension skills. Other techniques and exercises which have been used in English for Special Purposes classes include practice in note taking, cloze-testing on lectures, mock formal interviews and informal conversations, and discourse analyses of sample lectures. Such analyses include explanation of kinesic characteristics, such as eye-contact, illustrative gestures, and change of position to indicate a new point in the lecture. Use of tape recorders or language laboratories excludes kinesic features, and thus cannot account for the interactive quality of communication. With the techniques described here, students are able to use the language of their field with a proficiency difficult to attain without such preparation. (PJM)

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PEBBLES IN THEIR EARS:

LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES PROGRAMS

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PEBBLES IN THEIR EARS

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The title of this paper is intended as an analogy between the problems of the Greek orator who must surely be the patron of the Western Speech Communication Association and foreign students in the United States. Whereas his difficulty was speaking, theirs is understanding what they hear in classes, seminars, and lecture halls. And a very serious problem this is, since, in the words of Wilga Rivers, "It has been estimated that of the time adults spend in communication activities, 45 percent is devoted to listening, only 30 percent to speaking, 16 percent to reading, and a mere 9 percent to writing." (1978:62). Research among language laboratory directors indicates that even with notes provided, international students retain only about 20% of what they hear in a lecture.

The teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language has gone from a discipline designed around teacher-imposed objectives to one stressing the background and needs of the learner and based on careful analysis of those factors prior to preparation of curriculum. This means that ESL/EFL professionals must consider the uses to which their students will put English.

Closely connected with the concept of learner-centered instruction is that of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Up until the 1970's, American ESL professionals concerned themselves with teaching strategies appropriate for groups of non-native-speakers planning to enter a large variety of vocational, occupational, and professional fields. However, it was plain to many that the general English taught in these classes was not preparing learners for the special kinds of English they would need to know to participate successfully in courses in their major fields. At the same time, certain linguists were investigating the rhetorical features -- vocabulary, grammatical forms, idioms, and

paragraph structure -- of different types of English, such as the language of science, engineering, and technology. British and American findings pinpointed several areas of difference between general English and that of specific occupational and professional fields. In addition to technical vocabulary, scientific discourse, for example, makes heavy use of subtechnical vocabulary, e.g. words such as "system," 'process," "function," which carry a large load of responsibility outside the sciences. Transition devices such as "first," "second," "since," "because," "thus," and "therefore" are frequently used. In the area of grammar, atypical use of verb tenses, for example,non-temporal meaning and very low occurrence of progressive forms, is more common than it is in general English. There is a high frequency of reduced clauses for brevity and efficiency. Ellipsis is common, with writers and lecturers assuming student awareness of omitted information. Moreover, scientific and technological language makes more frequent use of discourse features such as definition, classification, and process description than does its non-scientific equivalent.

The concern of many teachers of English as a Second Language with respect to the usefulness of what they were teaching and the findings described above have coincided to produce a new approach to language teaching, English for Specific Purposes. Based on the kind of research just mentioned, it was bound to have a strong impact on instruction in reading and writing for non-native-speakers of English. But it has also affected the teaching of listening comprehension skills. Of importance is the investigation into features which interfere with decoding and comprehension of lecture and other spoken materials. Christopher Candlin of the University of Lancaster in England identifies reference, backward and forward, as a source of significant difficulty to non-native-speakers in a lecture situation. (An example of backward

reference is the statement, "The same can be said about the use of coal for energy,""the same" referring to a previous remark about, say, uranium. If the unlucky listeners haven't understood the first comment, they are twice lost.) Other problems for the foreign listener are ellipsis and the use of substitute words such as "one" and "do."

There is an abundance of material on tape, mostly in lecture form, designed to familiarize non-native speakers with the kinds of discourse features described above. Its goal is to help students decode special language when they confront it in a lecture.

Otto (1979: 319-327) describes a sequence of four exercises in listening for note-taking developed at Arya Mehr University of Technology in Isfahan, Iran. The goals were two-fold: listening skill development and topic coverage. The vocabulary and rhetorical features were oriented toward chemistry. The first exercise was a dictation followed by true/false questions. The second was a cloze exercise on a mini-lecture. Next was a mini-lecture followed by a fill-in note-taking exercise. Finally, a mini-lecture was presented, accompanied by a fill-in outline.

Two types of speech sample, a formal interview and an informal conversation, were used by Snow and Perkins (1979: 51-63) for developing the listening comprehension skills of advanced non-native-speakers. Topics such as agriculture, liberal arts, psychology, and sociology were used. A formal interview with an authority in a given area was chosen rather than a lecture because questions could be keyed to the interests and proficiency level of the students. Interviewees, it was discovered, tended to talk in a lecture style in the

question-answer sessions. Moreover, the interviewer was able to follow up on points that were unclear or insufficiently covered.

Once the interviews were recorded, students were given written summaries of them as well as special vocabulary and definitions of technical concepts. In addition, students were given a selective list of things to listen for. Thereafter, they listened to the interviews twice, once to answer questions on the content and the second time to check on the accuracy of their responses.

Next, the informal conversations were played. Brief summaries were handed out as were questions for selective listening. The students heard this tape three times.

At the end of these sessions the listeners knew a considerable amount about the topics dealt with. The culminating experience was a speech activity (round table, debate, panel, etc.) in which the learners discussed ideas and reactions stimulated by the interviews.

Candlin and Murphy go one step further than Otto, Snow and Perkins. In addition to analyzing the discourse of lectures given to engineering students at the University of Lancaster, Candlin and Murphy carefully observed and described the lecturers' kinesic characteristics. Eye-contact, illustrative gestures, relevant use of the blackboard, change of position to indicate a new point in the lecture, and pauses which gave students time to digest content were found to be highly important. They made the lecture an interactive event, one aspect of which could not be separated from the others. Thus, Candlin and Murphy conclude that the use of the tape recorder or language laboratory for improving listening skills is inadequate, since it excludes the kinesic features just described. They also reject the dictation, commonly used as a listening exercise, as a valid instru-

ment for developing aural (a-u-r-a-l) ability. What they call for is exercises including all the elements found in a lecture: authentic content, graphic illustrations, and paralinguistic information. Such true-to-life materials are only available through real lectures, videotaped presentations, or taped lectures accompanied by slides.

An example of this kind of listening exercise was provided by the English Department of the National Institute of Electricity and Electronics in Boumerdes, Algeria. Hansen and Van Hammen, English instructors at INELEC, designed a series of aural comprehension units based on topics in technology and engineering. Faculty members in these areas, whose dialects represented various sections of the United States, prepared mini-lectures of from seven to fifteen minutes on topics they would discuss at greater length in technology and engineering courses. Students were asked to take notes of the lectures. Thereafter, they were given fill-in outlines to complete. All drawings presented by the lecturers were reproduced by the listeners, so that in follow-up sessions they could explain the illustrations to each other.

At the University of Massachusetts and Harvard University, Lezberg and Hilferty set up job interviews between foreign students and Boston businessmen in the students' fields of occupational interest. As a result, the former received authentic experiences in the use of the language characteristic of their areas (1976:58-66,148-157).

Oregon State University's intensive English program for non-native-speakers has made frequent use of Greathouse and Peterson's Better Listening Skills (1977), a series of five videotaped mini-lectures ranging from seven to fifteen minutes each. The presentations deal with

timely subjects in the biological, physical, and social sciences. An impressive array of material accompanies each lecture. The lessons are designed to improve listeners' aural comprehension, vocabulary development, outlining, reading, and writing skills. Although Better Listening Skills has serious technical problems, it is the kind of program needed for enhancing foreign students' listening ability.

As this discussion suggests, English for Specific Purposes employs a variety of means for achieving the goal of improved listening skills. Indeed, a tenet of ESP is that it uses whatever has proved of value in increasing the English-language proficiency of non-native-speakers in specific areas. The growing availability and range of the media permit the design of new activities for achieving better aural comprehension. Such activities can now place students in authentic, realistic situations similar to those they find in their professional or occupational training and in their subsequent careers. Thus, they are able to understand and use the language of their field with a proficiency difficult to attain without this preparation.

Footnotes

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